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ABSTRACT

A research project investigated the relationship between cognitive development in college students and their rhetorical maturity. Viewing the problem of audience in composition instruction in terms of cognitive development reveals that it may not be enough to tell students that they must consider audience if they do not have the cognitive maturity to act on that instruction, or if they deny the validity of any viewpoint other than their own. Furthermore, audience has different meanings for oral and written communication, with the difference between the two being context--the set of elements held in common between the message generator and the message receiver. The more the two have in common, the more context-dependent the message can be and still be effective, but the less the two have in common, the greater the need for the message to be context-independent. Students most often have to write for a constructed audience and so must construct a context. A measure of context for assessing audience awareness was used to study and evaluate students' writing samples and to analyze the relationship between writing ability and cognitive maturity. (The paper includes a chart of context measure criteria and examples, and three sample student essays.) (SRT)

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FINDING A FRAME OF REFERENCE: TOWARD AN ANALYSIS OF CONTEXTUAL ELABORATION IN COLLEGE WRITING

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Suzanne Langer states "the way a question is asked limits and disposes the ways in which any answer to it--right or wrong--may be given." And later: "In our questions lie our principles of analysis."

As teachers and researchers in the field of composition, we have been asking questions about the nature and influence of "audience" in writing for a number of years. Historically, our inquiry has its roots in the classical rhetoric tradition of Aristotle and Plato. Plato stated that "the scientific rhetorician will classify the types of discourse and the types of souls, and the various ways souls are affected...and suggest a type of speech appropriate to each type of soul." Aristotle's Rhetoric is the well from which we draw our most fundamental concepts of audience. Kinneavy's original conceptualization of the interaction between the author, the audience, and the subject drew heavily on this classical model of rhetoric, and has taken hold in a great number of respected composition textbooks.

Posing the question of audience from a rhetorical perspective focuses our attention on analyzing the audience. As teachers we know how very important it is to instruct our students in these fundamental strategies. We try to help them identify, as well as they can, the characteristics of their

particular audience as well as their particular purpose in a given writing situation.

Yet the classical rhetoric perspective is not the only useful one. Walter Ong raised the question as a literary critic when he wrote "The writer's audience is always a fiction." He offered an interpretation that contrasted the "entirely natural oral world" with a more artificially contrived "world of writing." He asked: "How do I deal with persons who are not present to me and who will never be?" He couched his answer in the literary tradition: There is no way to write unless you read a lot. No way of fictionalizing (imagining) an audience, unless you know some of the options--how audiences are and have been imagined by other writers. (p. 41)

As writers and teachers of writing, we can all appreciate that insight, too. Yes, we agree, our students probably would be better writers if they did more reading.

When we turn to the cognitive theorists for a perspective on the question of audience, we find them heavily influenced by the writings of Piaget, Flavell, Kohlberg, and Perry (among others). Cognitive developmentalists frame their questions in terms of the individual student's ability to recognize and come to terms with "the other," a consciousness outside of themselves. How can those students imagine a perspective different from

their own if they are not yet cognitively mature enough to "decenter," or "empathize," or, restructure reality from a "contextually relative" point of view?

Barry Kroll saw the problem of audience awareness in discourse as a function of cognitive ego-centrism, referring to Piaget's term describing an early stage of cognitive development in children. Kroll suggested that since writing is a more abstract, and difficult task then speaking, decentering in writing lags behind that of speaking, and the student's lack of audience awareness in written texts is a function of that "cognitive egocentrism."

Susan Miller uses Kohlberg's theory of moral development as the basis of her study of remedial college writers. (1980) In her search for a model linking writing and thinking, she found Kohlberg's stage development concepts of autonomy and empathy forming a useful framework for analyzing and identifying with a variety of audiences.

In my research I turned to William Perry whose model of Intellectual Development in College Students (1975) emphasized forms of intellectual complexity over content. Perry presents a nine stage hierarchy to explain the intellectual growth of college students. He sees students progressing from a limited "dualistic" perspective. As students incorporate multiple

perspectives of reality into their own world view, they enter Perry's stage of "contextual relativism." It was this notion of contextually relative thinking that seemed to speak to my own ideas of the problem of audience in student writing.

This cognitive developmental orientation offers yet another rethinking of our ideas about "audience." In Langer's terms, we are asking a new question, with different parameters limiting the answer: It may not be enough that students are told that they must consider audience, if they do not have the cognitive maturity to act on that instruction. And, how can they fictionalize or imagine or analyze another point of view if they deny the validity of any viewpoint other than their own?

Again, as teachers of writing we have, more than occasionally, encountered students who stare at us blankly after we spend long conferences trying to explain "audience." Yet trying to explain principles of audience analysis to students who cannot quite understand the need to make concessions to another point of view is clearly an inappropriate strategy.

Doug Park, and Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford have offered the most sophisticated framework for this discussion of audience. Park asks: "What are the meanings of audience," suggesting that one meaning or interpretation is not sufficient. He writes: "audience essentially refers not to people as such but to those

apparent aspects of knowledge and motivation in readers and listeners that form the contexts for discourse and the ends of discourse." (p.249) Ede and Lunsford refine this idea in their essay on the theory of audience. They see a dicotomy in the literature between audience addressed and audience invoked. Both Park, and Ede and Lunsford suggest that either/or interpretations are limiting, and that some complex combination of questions and answers is a better framework for theory building and research.

Just when we, as teachers, begin to think that we have a handle on the slippery concept of audience--a rhetorical grasp, a literary grasp, a cognitive developmental grasp--original thinkers like Park, and Ede and Lunsford ask the question in entirely new terms, and force us to rethink--our old answers do not fit the new questions.

Doug Park, in the same article "The Meanings of Audience," anticipated those new questions when he suggested that "we replace the question 'who is the audience?' with a new set of more precise questions as to how the piece in question establishes or posesses the contexts that make it meaningful for readers." (p. 252)

It is in the broader framework of this very rich and increasingly complex tradition that I began an inquiry into the nature of rhetorical maturity in college student writing. From

the top of this "abstract, theory mountain" we descend to the "jungle of empirical research." Research questions are by definition quite different from rhetorical questions. Yet, the goal of research is to help build theory that more accurately reflects reality.

I am strongly influenced by the cognitive perspective. In the process of planning a research project to investigate the relationship between cognitive development in college students and their rhetorical maturity, I became sidetracked by the puzzling problem of how to evaluate or assess evidence of audience awareness in writing. My question was a methodological one: did any instruments exist to measure evidence of audience in writing? While there are a number of evaluation instruments that are used to assess writing skill (Diederich, NAEP, holistic scoring, primary trait scoring, etc.). I was not satisfied that they could addresss the particular question of measurable evidence of audience awareness in writing. In an attempt to create such an instrument to use in my research, I turned to language theorists, linguists, sociologists and anthropologists for help.

The term audience has different meanings for oral and written communication. A number of socio-linguists and anthropologists have identified context as the crucial determining

difference between the two modes of communication (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, Bernstein 1971, Shafer 1981). For the purpose of my study, however, context can be understood as the set of elements held in common between the message generator (writer, or speaker) and the message received (reader or listener). The more the two have in common (time, place, occasion, background, etc.), the more context dependent the message can be, yet still be effective. The less the two have in common, the greater the need for the message to be context independent. Basil Bernstein (1971) presented a good example of this distinction:

> We can distinguish between uses of language which can be called 'context bound' and uses of language which are less context bound. Consider, for example, the two following stories which Peter Hawkins, Assistant Research Officer in the Sociological Research Unit, constructed as a result of his analysis of the speech of middle class and working-class five year old children. The children were given a series of four pictures which told a story and they were invited to tell the story. The first picture showed some boys playing football, in the second the ball goes through the window of a house; the third shows a woman looking out of the window and a man making an ominous gesture, and in the fourth the children are moving away. Here are the two stories:
>
> (1) Three boys are playing football and one boy kicks the ball and it goes through the window and the ball breaks the window and the boys are looking at it and a man comes out and shouts at them because they've broken the windows so they run away and then that lady looks out of her window and she tells the boys off.

> (2) They're playing football and he kicks it and it goes through there it breaks the window and they're looking at it and he comes out and shouts at them because they've broken it so they run away and then she looks out and she tells them off.
>
> With the first story the reader does not have to have the four pictures which were used as the basis for the story, whereas in the case of the second story the reader would require the initial pictures in order to make sense of the story. The first story is free of the context which generated it, whereas the second story is much more closely tied to its context. (p. 178)

Vygotsky (1962) presents perhaps the simplist and most poetic description of the difference between context dependece and context independence when he writes about thought and language:

> Inner speech is condensed, abbreviated speech. Written speech is deployed to its fullest extent, more complete than oral speech. Inner speech is almost entirely known to the thinker. Written speech, on the contrary, must explain the situation fully in order to be intelligible. The change from maximally compact inner speech to maximally detailed written speech requires what might be called deliberate semantics--deliberate structuring of the web of meaning. (p. 98)

Messages are either context dependent--in which case the speaker and the listener already share elements of context, or context independent--in which case the speaker or writer must construct or create a shared context in his written text or speech. This is of course an overly simplified dichotomy, since every communication act is some combination of these two cases.

We can, perhaps, see a parallel between context dependence (shared context) and context independence (constructed context) and Ede and Lunsford's idea of "audience addressed and audience invoked." "Audience addressed" appears to correspond to those context dependent situations. In speech, it refers to a speaker with a real listener or listeners. In writing, it may correspond to a writer writing an article for the editors of a particular journal, aware of all the mutually agreed upon constraints of that particular forum. The writer knows what is expected within a narrow set of limits and the editor, as reader, brings a certain amount of predictable shared context to his/her reading of the article.

"Audience invoked" corresponds to the writing situation where readers and writer do not necessarily share a situational context. In this case, the writer must construct a context, invent a reader, invoke an audience. Using the journal example again, while the editors may be a known quantity, the general readership is much more nebulous. While the readers have some characteristics in common with the writer, the population is broader and less homogeneous.

When we are not sure of our forum (our situational context) we must make a much more conscious effort to preempt misunderstandings and confusion, and to shape or build for our readers a

sense of shared context within the text itself. The writer, in this circumstance, constructs a context.

Our students function in that hazy, ambiguous world of constructed context ("audience invoked") more often than most writers. The most recent pedagogical literature tries to help writing teachers construct assignments that include real audiences, but the assumption is that school writing remains school writing.

In my research, I looked at student writing generated under the most typical, arhetorical circumstances. Students were asked to provide a writing sample responding to the prompt:

> Describe the best class you've taken in high school or college. What made it positive for you? Be as specific as possible. Feel free to go into as much detail as you think will give us a clear idea of the class; for example, you might want to discuss areas such as what the teacher was like, the subject matter, the particular content (reading, films, etc.) the atmosphere of the class, grading procedures, etc. We want your thoughts and comments--a complete description of your experience and you felt about it. It will help greatly if you can be as specific and complete in your answer as possible.

Drawing on the disciplines of linguistics and rhetoric, I examined student essays for evidence of context. Halliday and Hasan (1976), in an attempt to identify some of the linguistic attributes of constructed context, distinguished pronoun reference and transition words as elements contributing to cohesion within a text. They distinguished "endophoric

references," those references within a text, from "exophoric references," the more ambiguous references that take the reader outside the text. We can see clear examples of how these devices work in Basil Bernstein's example.

When students open their essays with a clear indication of their aim or controlliong thesis, they are exhibiting evidence of some rhetorical awareness of purpose, and when they provide proof or support, or attempt to build credibility in any way, they are either intuitively or consciously sensitive to the rhetorical nature of the task.

Drawing on these linguistic and rhetorical sources and a model developed by Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I constructed a measure of context to assess audience awareness in writing [see figure I]. To establish the validity of this untested measure, two respected researchers and experts in the field of rhetoric and composition reviewed and critiqued the scale. Jeanne Fahnestock, co-author of A Rhetoric of Argument (1982), and Anne Ruggeles Gere, co-author of Attitudes, Language and Change (1979) both reviewed the measure for purposes of validity. Both interpreted the concept of context, as it has been defined in this study, as clearly and closely associated with a writer's audience awareness. The reliability of the measure was assessed after an initial pilot study based on a

CONTEXT MEASURE CRITERIA AND EXAMPLES

Score	Level	Criteria/Characteristics	Example w/comments
0	No context	Absence of any clues which would help a reader make sense of the intended message. Possible characteristics may include the following: Sentence fragments, ambiguous or non-standard abbreviations, lists without any apparent organizing principle.	Geo. 3 -- friendly teacher, easy grader, class discussion.
+1	Level 1	Clarifies in the beginning basic elements of framework and purpose (what am I telling whom, under what condition and why?) Does not continue to develop or build on initial framework; possible confusing references or organization.	English 393 has been the most valuable course for me. The most important one is because it is all original. Every assignment in this course is very practical. I thought that the subject matter as well as the content of this course was appropriate.
+2	Level 2	Continues to clarify context of thought by distinguishing own observations and experiences from reported or synthesized information. Uses marked cohesive devices as transitions. May lapse into occasional tangential ideas and unclear referrents.	The best class I've taken since I began college was a psychology class at Florida State University. It was positive because of the professor I had. At first when I told people I had Dr. _____, they told me to watch out he was tough, but I found that even though he was hard however I enjoyed the class so much it did not matter.
+3	Level 3	Makes explicit relationships among various sources of ideas (own experience, instructors, research, general knowledge). Fully elaborated text--using specific details to support generalizations; "taking bows" in different directions to allow for alternative positions, clearly marked cohesive relationships within text.	Dr. _____, the course instructor, had a unique approach to presenting course information. While most courses at this campus are taught by the instructor lecturing day after day, the students enrolled in this class do the instructing. [Description followed.]

[Total possible score 6 points]

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statistical correlation (Ebel, 1967) of twenty sample essays read by two independent raters. The reliability coeficient was .92 (almost perfect agreement between the two raters).

The following sample essays demonstrate how this measure of levels of context can be applied.

ESSAY A

> One of the best classes I've taken since I began College is my first year English course with Dr. R_____ P_____. This class gave me insight into more things than just how to write essays. Dr. P_____ is very liberal, and he discussed with us a variety of subjects. The topics of his discussions were varied, and consisted of such things as sexuality, war, death, life and relationships between people. Sometimes we wrote papers on a few of these topics, but generally we talked about them. I enjoyed these discussions, because I feel it is important to have a broad understanding about many things.

ESSAY A Context Score 1

The writer provides initial context in the first sentence and goes on to make a generalization in sentence two which he attempts to prove by examples. The judgement he is trying to support is that gaining "insights" is more valuable than just "learning to write." However, he does not successfully develop his thesis beyond a very minimal list of one word discussion topics. In his conclusion, he mouths a platitute about understanding but does not make it real for the reader. He does not seem to know how to anticipate a reader's question.

ESSAY B

Two years ago I took a course called Advanced Composition. I found it to be one of the most interesting courses I have taken since I returned to college. I love English grammar, but this course presented the material in a completely different manner. I found the course most challenging.

Our assignments consisted of a workbook and individual composition projects. The workbook assignments were done at home, then handed in and graded, and then handed back to be corrected. Each exercise in the workbook was thoroughly explained so that everyone could do the exercises easily.

The professor who taught the course was excellent, and I had had him for other classes so I knew what he expected of his students. He took the time every day to touch each student in a special way and to make that person feel important. Students rarely skipped class because of this. Nobody wanted to miss getting his "warm fuzzy" for the day.

ESSAY B Context Score 3

This paper is clearly superior to the first in context. Not only does the writer give the reader a time frame ("Two years ago") but she articulates the criteria upon which she is making her judgement (the presentation of the material, and the challenge). She seems to have a reader clearly in mind as she recounts the course requirements--a reader who was not present in the course, but who has a familiarity with college course in general. She attempts to support her evaluation of her professor, but loses her momentum at the end of the third paragraph when her writing begins to sound like greeting card sentiment

("He took the time every day to touch each student in a special way . . .") Additionally, her references to "skipping class" may be more appropriate to an audience of other students, than teachers. Her unclear pronoun reference and the unanswered question at the end of the paper contribute to the middle level context score.

ESSAY C

Disillusioning as it is for me to say it, I'd have to admit that classmates are the things that make or break a class for me.

I say disillusioning because I am a person who prides myself on my individualism, and the thought that my benefits in a class come from the minds that surround me is contradictory.

But it is true. My favorite classes, American/ British and Advanced Placement English--both high school classes--were taken with some of the most intelligent beings in my high school. Those students were unafraid to question the teacher, the teacher's expectations, classmates' theories, and occasionally were unafraid to even ask why the heck this poet had written this stupid poem!

Another reason those classmates were so important is they also did not hesitate to answer! I find this to be such a problem in college, but these students in my high school class were unafraid to postulate, theorize, answer questions--in effect, become vulnerable.

I think that's one of the biggest hangups for college students today, including myself. We become so impressed with each other--or the fact that we're smart enough to be here--that we never feel <u>quite</u> confident that our answer is close enough to the right one for the class to hear.

And though a good teacher is important to my enjoyment of a class, the teacher is still only a complement to the learning that is going on. We had a fantastic teacher for my American Lit class--he

> encouraged us to speak out, disagree with him and would often point out to us at the end of the day what he had learned.
>
> But this same teacher had another class for which I was a teacher's assistant, and though he tried the same tactics, he never got quite the same reaction from this more subdued section.
>
> Put into a classroom situation, I find I do not learn so much as an individual, but as a part of the whole. If it hadn't been for the challenge posed me by the outspokenness of my fellow high school English students, I never would have been encouraged to delve as deeply into the coursework as I did.

ESSAY C Context Score 6

This paper provides an interesting counterpoint to the first papers considered. To begin with, the writer immediately draws the reader into her own thought processes. Before she even identifies the class under discussion, she provides the reader with a very important and complex kind of context which can be thought of as meta-thinking. Once we; as readers, understand her premises, we are more likely to follow her discussion. Not until paragraph three does she finally name the class, effectively grounding her essay in an identifiable concrete experience-high school English.

She goes into great detail about the nature of the class discussions, emphasizing the aspects of questioning and challenging; yet shw uses details that can be generalized to other similar situations. The development of her topic does not stop with her identification of a best class. She goes on to define and elaborate through contrast why college classes do not, in her

experience, measure up to the learning environment she remembers. She even cites empirical evidence, as a participant observer, to support her thesis: It takes more than a teacher to make a good class (paragraph 7). Through the course of the essay, she has used a number of context creating strategies to help guide readers to her insight.

Although I used this instrument as part of a study investigating the relationship between writing ability and cognitive maturity, the tool can quite possibly be adapted by individual teachers to increase students' awareness of the writer/audience relationship.

I've framed the question of audience in terms of evidence of context in writing. I've described a very particular measure of context, but I hope I've made it quite clear that the idea of context is not limited to those elements of writing that can be measured by a checklist.

Almost 50 years ago, the anthropologist Malinowski drew on his experiences among the primatives of the Trobriand Islands. He concluded that meaning is not

> contained in an utterance.... A statement, spoken in real life is never detached from the situation in which it has been uttered.... Utterances and situation are bound up inextricably with each other, and the context of situation is indistinguishable for the understanding of the words. (p. 467)

Understanding the words of primitives seems far removed from our most sophisticated thinking about the nature and theory of audience. Yet, effective communication in both cases depends on the sender's message, with its nuance intact, being received and understood.

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